

The Theory of the Amphictyony in in Pre-Monarchial Israel

JACOB WEINGREEN
University of Dublin

A curious and somewhat disturbing feature of contemporary Old Testament studies is the reluctance of some scholars to acknowledge that a theory offered to explain a particular historical situation or phenomenon—no matter how persuasive such theory may be—must be presumed to represent a tentative, workable hypothesis which may be invalidated by future research. One notes a tendency on the part of the disciples of a particular school of thought to regard an attractive hypothesis as having been factually established, since they treat it as a valid basis for the interpretation of features in related areas of study. The results yielded by this process are claimed, if not explicitly then by implication, to be authenticated by the parent hypothesis from which they are derived. Such, indeed, is the case of the Documentary Hypothesis which is being progressively challenged.¹ Our concern here is with the theory of the amphictyony proposed by the late Martin Noth to provide a rational explanation of the ties of association which presumably existed among the Hebraic tribes in the period preceding the establishment of the monarchy under Saul and which, it is claimed, must have had a decisive influence in uniting the tribes under a single authority.²

It is generally recognized that the external, menacing pressure of the more technically advanced Philistines precipitated the political movement towards unification, but what has not been clarified is how this union was accomplished. The picture drawn by the biblical historian of twelve closely knit tribes of Israel acting in unison during the period of the Judges is apparently influenced by the ideal for a united Israel. What exercised the mind of Noth was the following question. Starting from the historical fact that a union of the twelve premonarchial Hebraic tribes was accomplished by Saul, what was the nature of their preunion association? In his view, it seemed that there must have been some basic cohesive element in their intertribal association which facilitated their union at this critical juncture in their history. It seemed desirable to attach a descriptive title to this relationship, and to this end the analogy of what appeared to be a similar socioreligious system in another culture was suggested as likely to explain the character of the association of the

1 See J. Weingreen, "The Continuity of Tradition from Bible to Mishna," *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem 1969), 27-34.

2 A convenient summary of the theory of the amphictyony is given in Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, trans. Stanely Goodman (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), 88f.

premonarchial tribes. Noth found his analogy in a socioreligious institution which the Hebraic tribes held in common with the later tribal groupings of the Greek amphictyony, in that each system consisted of a group of twelve tribes owing allegiance to a common shrine. He rightly pointed out that the number of tribes linked together in the Greek amphictyony, namely, twelve, was not fortuitous. On the contrary, this number was dictated by the practical need of providing a monthly rota of religious duties to be undertaken by each tribe, so as to ensure the uninterrupted maintenance of worship at the common shrine throughout the year. Noth argued that, likewise, the number of the premonarchial Hebraic tribes was restricted to, or possibly extended to, twelve for the same reason. According to the account in Josh. 24, the twelve tribes renewed their covenant relationship with YHWH at the shrine of Shechem. This solemn ceremony was a confirmation of their common allegiance to YHWH at that central shrine. It seemed to Noth, therefore, that a parallel between the Greek amphictyony and the association of the premonarchial Hebraic tribes could be established and that the latter system could legitimately be explained in terms of the former.

It is remarkable how widely this theory has gained acceptance, not as a plausible and tentative explanation of a particular historical situation, but almost as an established historical fact, with all the attendant ramifications. Adherence to the view that the twelve Hebraic tribes were bound together by strong religious ties and that these found expression in worship at a central shrine has led to the further conclusion that a political or constitutional organization flowed from this religious union.³ There are some scholars who, while treating Noth's theory seriously, have nevertheless shown some reservations about reading too much into it and extending its influence into other spheres.⁴ There are others, however, who have categorically questioned the validity of this theory as representing a true picture of the socioreligious organization of the premonarchial Hebraic tribes. They reject all interpretations of historical situations based on it, whether in the religious or the political spheres.⁵

3 An example of the total acceptance of Noth's theory and the elaboration of its influence in the period of the Judges may be seen in John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 142f. This section of Bright's book begins with a chapter entitled "The Constitution of Early Israel: The Amphictyony and Its Institutions." On p. 159, Bright states that the amphictyony was "a loose—not to say weak—form of government."

4 R. de Vaux's view is representative of the cautious approach of some scholars in dealing with the theory of the amphictyony. In his book *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 93, he remarks: "The comparison [i.e., with the Greek amphictyony] is helpful, provided we do not press it too far and try to find all the features of the Greek amphictyonies in the Israelite federation." Nevertheless, he accepts the notion that "in the first stage of its settlement in Canaan, Israel consisted of a federation of twelve tribes" (p. 92) and that "they shared the same name, and together they formed 'all Israel'" (p. 93). This view will be disputed in this article, in that the term *federation* cannot be applied to the period of the Judges and refers to the establishment of the monarchy.

5 Cf. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 256, where he observes that "this authority [i.e., of the elders], unlike that of the Greek amphictyony, was not religious in any way." His view that "Israel had a political organisation

The weaknesses in the theory of the amphictyony, as seen by the present writer, may be summarized as follows:

- 1.) The absence of any firm parallel to the Greek amphictyonic system in the ancient Near East⁶ should alert us to the need for caution in attempting to interpret the premonarchial Hebraic tribal association in terms of the Greek amphictyony. Even if one were to concede that the tribes were somehow bound by common religious ties at one period, these ties were evidently loose and not strong enough to influence the course of developing political situations.
- 2.) It is unrealistic to hold that, had each of the twelve tribes enjoyed complete autonomy, they would have voluntarily submerged their independence in a supranational authority, even in the face of the Philistine peril. A temporary coalition of forces would have met the situation without involving the concept of federation under a monarchy. We shall demonstrate that the premonarchial tribal political system was, in fact, a dual one, consisting of two independent groupings of tribes, each group being under the leadership or domination of a leading tribe.⁷ It would follow, then, that any religious association involving all the twelve tribes must have been achieved by prior arrangement between the two leading tribes. It may be that such an arrangement had been motivated by political necessity stemming from the dominant tribes' common interests in consolidating their hold on the country.
- 3.) The theory of a premonarchial amphictyony—not to speak of the theory that one was in operation during the monarchy—cannot be harmonized with the fact of the disruption of the Israel-Judah monarchy at the accession of Rehoboam, particularly since the federated state was split into two very unequal parties.

This brief study will endeavor to demonstrate that the constitutional system which governed the premonarchial tribes was not fashioned by any unifying religious ties. We shall adduce evidence from the relevant Old Testament records to show that, at this time, there were two distinct groupings of tribes living in Canaan. The larger group occupied the northern and central areas of the country and was led by—or, to be more precise, was under the domination of—the Joseph (Ephraim) tribe. The smaller group in the southern areas was subject to the tribe of Judah. The political status of the minor tribes in each grouping may be described in modern terms as that of satellite tribes. It follows that any decision of a political or a religious nature reached by a chief tribe would be binding upon these tribes under its domination. We suggest that the momentous decision to create a federation of the twelve tribes was reached by the two leading tribes, Joseph (Ephraim) and Judah, and that the rest of the tribes, being subject to them, had no choice but to acquiesce in

before the monarchy” and that “it was a confederation of independent tribes” (p. 256) will be disputed in this article.

⁶ Noth, *History*, 87, draws attention to the list of twelve Ishmaelite tribes given in Gen. 25:13-16 and of other tribal groupings in Gen. 36:10-14 and 20-28. He suggests that the organization of twelve tribal units in Israel has its analogy in other near eastern tribal groupings.

⁷ This view is opposed to that expressed by Kaufmann (see n. 5, above) and by Bright (*History*, 143) that “though certain tribes by virtue of their size (e.g. Joseph, Judah) were able to assume dominant positions. . . all twelve tribes were equal.”

this decision. A hint of the subservience of the minor tribes to the leading ones may be seen in their designation as "concubine" tribes. Whether or not this unflattering designation is to be interpreted as indicating that they were not of pure Hebraic stock, the fact is that they were regarded as being of low status in the tribal grouping.

The dissolution of the Israel-Judah federation, commonly referred to as the "disruption of the monarchy," can best be explained as a reversion to the status quo which pertained prior to the achievement of the federation. The political upheaval which led to the disruption of the monarchy points to the prior existence of two separate groupings of tribes. This identifiable duality of tribal groupings, the one dominated by Joseph (Ephraim) and the other by Judah, persisted during the brief period of the federation from Saul to the accession of Rehoboam, though this duality was held in check and prevented from reverting to the two original/separate units during the reigns of David and Solomon. When the pressures which had made the federation inevitable had disappeared, old rivalries between the two groups began to manifest themselves, paving the way for disintegration which, in fact, finally resulted in the dissolution of the federation.

The troubled history of the federated monarchy indicates that a real unity of the tribes was never achieved. The political union which took the form of a federation was not conceived of as the merging of the two tribal groupings into one homogeneous nation: the monarchy was envisaged not as a united monarchy but as a dual monarchy. It is in this light—and we shall shortly advance textual evidence from the records for the validity of this view—that we can satisfactorily explain the checkered fortunes of the monarchy from its founding under Saul till its disruption at the accession of Rehoboam.

It may be held, on purely general considerations, that if a political crisis arises within a homogeneous nation, the solution for the dissident party does not lie in the partitioning of the country into two separate and independent political units. In the internal revolution in a unified state, the aim of the revolutionary party is to replace the king or leader with the leader of the revolt. When, however, following a revolution, the partitioning of a country does take place, it may be confidently assumed that originally there had been two separate political units which had been joined together either under the pressure of a common crisis or by conquest. When these pressures disappear or a dissident faction becomes strong enough, the tendency to revert to the original status of separate political units begins to assert itself. A recent analogy in European history is afforded by the constitution of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which dominated much of central Europe before the World War of 1914-18. The emperor was king of Austria and king of Hungary in Budapest. We shall show that, in like fashion, during the period of the Israel-Judah monarchy, the king reigned over two political units and that, in fact, he was crowned twice, once in the north and once in the south.

In order to assess realistically the premonarchical tribal organization, it will be profitable to examine the later and more clearly defined constitutional status of the Israel-Judah monarchy and then move backwards in time through the stages of the fluctuating political situation. It is to be noted, first, that even during the apparently peaceful and prosperous reign of Solomon, the rift between the northern and southern partners in the federation manifested itself. We read of the revolutionary role of Jeroboam and of his escape to Egypt for asylum: Jeroboam obviously represented a revolutionary separatist movement (1 Kgs. 11:40). On the accession of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the movement towards

separation came to head, following his haughty rejection of the northerners' demand for the abolition of the *corvée*, the system of forced labor which Solomon had instituted.⁸ The rallying cry raised by the secessionists was: "What share have we in (the dynasty of) David? Away to your homes, O Israel." This rebel manifesto surely points to the dissolution of a partnership in the federation by the secession of one of the contracting parties. It also suggests that the identity of the northern group had never been submerged in the overall federal state, but that it had retained its separate identity within the federation. Furthermore, the fact that Rehoboam came to Schechem to be crowned king implies that his coronation was meant to confirm his accession to the throne by the people of the northern sector (1 Kgs. 12:1). His coronation over the southern area is mentioned in verse 17 of this chapter. The conclusion drawn from this episode is that the constitutional framework of the monarchy at this time was that of a dual monarchy of Israel-Judah in which both partners retained their separate identities.

Turning now to the situation when David seized power after the tragic death of Saul, it is significant that initially he was acknowledged king only by the Judean group of tribes; seven years elapsed before he could incorporate the northern sector into his realm. In 2 Sam. 5:4, it is stated that David reigned over Judah in Hebron seven years and that he reigned over all *Israel and Judah* in Jerusalem thirty-three years. One may read into the statement that David's dominion over all Israel and Judah implies the existence of a dual monarchy. David's failure to secure the allegiance of the northern population for seven years and the fact that a state of war actually existed between the north and the south clearly expressed the will of the northerners to become a separate entity once again. Biblical historians have not sufficiently stressed the fact that the disruption of the monarchy at the accession of Rehoboam had been anticipated by an earlier disruption of the federation after the death of Saul. The narrative suggests that David had been crowned twice; he was initially made king over the south and, after the lapse of seven years, he was acknowledged also as king over the north, following the murder of Ishbosheth and the disintegration of the ruling power of the north. David's kingdom, we maintain, was not a united one; recognition was given to the separate identities of both sectors of the population in the constitution of a dual monarchy. David's achievement may be described as having effected a refederation of the northern and southern groups.

Turning back in time to the founding of the monarchy under Saul, the theory of a dual monarchy under his regime might solve a textual problem in the enigmatic account of Saul's coronation in 1 Sam. 11:14. In 1 Sam. 10:1 we find the statement that Samuel anointed Saul as king. His election to kingship was confirmed by his being singled out for this high office by the process of elimination, which was said to have been guided by divine activity (verses 17-24). Samuel then laid the official document of the act of coronation before the Lord (verse 25), though there were some elements who refused to acknowledge Saul's election (verse 27). Then, strangely, we read in 11:14 that Samuel summoned

⁸ His rejection of their demands was expressed in the classical phrasing: "My father chastised you with whips; I shall chastise you with scorpions" (1 Kgs. 12:11).

the people to Hagilgal to “renew the coronation there.” In verse 15 we read that Saul was duly made king there and that the ceremony was followed by feasting and merrymaking. Scholars have been puzzled by this account of a renewal of Saul’s coronation. The simplest, though quite unsatisfactory, explanation which has been offered is that here we have another tradition, or version, of the one ceremony of coronation. Others, however, too prone to resort to textual emendation, have tried to solve the difficulty by substituting the word *n^eqaddēš*, ‘and let us sanctify’, for the word *n^ehaddēš*, ‘and let us renew’, in the text. This emendation in no way relieves the difficulty, for we are then driven to interpret the suggested emendation ‘let us sanctify’ as meaning ‘let us ratify’ the election of Saul as king. Apart from thus introducing a new difficulty, there seems to be no point in the implication that there was a need to ratify Saul’s election to kingship. The New English Bible also resorts to interpretation, which it incorporates into the translation “and let us renew *our allegiance* to the kingdom.” This rendering is not only subject to the same criticism which we hold against the proffered emendation, but it ignores the fact that a coronation actually took place and that this ceremony was followed by communal feasting and jollity.

If, however, we see in the situation two separate groups of tribes federating into a dual monarchy, then the need for two coronations at two different places is readily understood. Saul’s first coronation took place at Mizpah, where Samuel presented him to the people of the south as their duly elected king. His election of kingship was primarily in response to the challenge of the Philistines as to whether they or the neighboring Hebraic tribes would control the southern part of the country. Saul’s authority was, at that time, limited to the southern sector. However, when the people of Jabesh Gilead in the north felt helpless in the face of the contemptuous threats of the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:1-11), Saul came to their rescue. With a swift and brilliant military success he defeated the Ammonites and thus relieved the city of Jabesh Gilead. This episode, we suggest, persuaded the people of the northern group to acclaim Saul as their king also. It appears that, like his successor David, Saul was crowned king over the south and again over the north in two separate coronation ceremonies; thereby legal status was given to the constitution of a dual monarchy. The strange reference to the “renewal” of the coronation in 1 Sam. 11:14 may now easily be explained. The compiler of the book of Samuel had before him the record of the second coronation of Saul, but he did not realize the true facts. Since he thought of the monarchy as being a united one, he presented this second coronation ceremony as a renewal or, if you will, a confirmation of the first coronation.

From a reference in Ezek. 37:19, it would appear that the two tribal groupings remained under the leadership of their respective dominant tribes even during the history of both kingdoms after their separation. The prophet holds out the hopeful prospect of the two parts of Israel being one day merged into a single monarchy and he refers to the northern kingdom as “Ephraim and the tribes of Israel his associates.” This description of the northern kingdom implies that the individual tribes within each of the two kingdoms retained their tribal identities and that the leadership of Ephraim and Judah persisted even during the period of their separate histories after the disruption of federation. We again quote an example from recent European history to illustrate the reality of this situation, in which one element in a federation dominated the other partners. Before World War I, though the Germanic states had been united in a Greater Germany, the dominant state in this federation was Prussia, which stamped its policies on the whole country.

Our view, then, is that, if we are to postulate some religious association among the premonarchial Hebraic tribes, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with two separate groupings of tribes and not with twelve independent tribes. Any religious association of the twelve tribes must have been brought about by arrangement between the two dominant tribes, and the rest, being under their jurisdiction, had to acquiesce in this arrangement. Because the two groups did not merge into one homogeneous nation, but remained distinct even when the federation of the tribes was achieved, we conclude that such religious ties as were established between the two groups had no influence politically on the course of subsequent events. If the term *amphictyony* is to be used as a convenient description of their religious association, then its limitations should be pointed out and its area of effectiveness confined to the religious sphere and to the premonarchial period. Such a religious association must not be regarded as having had political implications which affected the pattern of the monarchial constitution.